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Pentagon Will Increase Its Use of Polygraph Tests

By BILL KELLER
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 3 — The Defense Department announced today it would use polygraph, or lie-detector, tests to screen up to 3,500 employees and contractors whose jobs required access to the Pentagon's most highly confidential information.

Gen. Richard G. Stillwell, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, said that the program was designed primarily to combat stepped-up foreign espionage activities aimed at American military technology, not to uncover unauthorized disclosures to the press.

However, he said the tests might also identify employees who had passed secret information to reporters.

Government use of lie-detector tests has drawn criticism from some members of Congress and civil liberties groups, who say the tests are not reliable, may misclassify innocent people as liars and can be used to intimidate employees who might disclose information embarrassing to their superiors.

It Has a Corps of 141

The Pentagon already maintains a corps of 141 polygraph examiners who test applicants for jobs at the National Security Agency, suspects in criminal cases and other purposes. It is estimated that 21,000 employees were tested under the current rules in 1983, the last year for which information was available, and General Stilwell said the number had been gradually increasing.

The new policy will permit agency heads throughout the Pentagon to prescribe the tests for employees and contractors as a condition for access to information. In most cases, the tests will be given to employees who have already passed normal security clearance procedures, including a background investigation.

The tests may be given to any employees or outside contractors who are allowed into "special access programs." General Stillwell said these 101 programs represented "some of the innermost secrets" of the Pentagon, including American intelligence sources and advanced military technology.

General Stillwell said the limit of 3,500 tests imposed by Congress was "probably about all we can manage anyhow this year with our current corps of polygraph examiners."

If the Government likes the results, he said, the testing may ultimately be applied to 10,000 employees who are privy to military secrets.

Those who refuse to take the tests, General Stillwell said, may be denied the right to see the information, but they must be offered a job at comparable pay. Employees or contractors whose tests show evidence of deception may also be denied information to classified information, but only after the Government offers them a second test and conducts an investigation.

Dr. John F. Beary 3d, who challenged the use of lie-detectors last year from his position as Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for health affairs, said today that use of polygraphs might backfire by giving credibility to spies who are trained to beat the test.

Dr. Beary, now an associate dean of Georgetown Medical School, said, "It seems to me you're setting up a situation where it's easier for a mole to penetrate the apparatus."

He Acknowledges Division

Advocates of polygraphs counter that the tests sometimes frighten guilty people into confessing or provide leads to investigators who uncover other evidence of wrongdoing.

General Stillwell acknowledged that scientists were divided on whether polygraphs were dependable, but he said that he considered them "between 75 and 90 percent" accurate and that any uncertainty was outweighed by the growing menace of foreign spying.

"It should be evident to everybody in this room," General Stillwell said at a news conference, "that over the last decade there has been an increase in the hostile intelligence presence in the United States. The prime targets of that are people in D.O.D. who have this access and the contractors who are working on our contracts."

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